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## It's Mine and You Can't Have It

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# It's Mine and You Can't Have It!

## Feeding the Information Appetite or Starving the Data Hungry?

by Joe Lokey,  
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**IT SEEMS TO BE A GIVEN** in the mine action community that you are acknowledged as an “expert” simply because you have stood up and declared it so. As with many humanitarian pursuits, there is no process to credential, certify, or license individuals, processes, or procedures in mine action. There is no guild or professional body to oversee and validate the veracity of performance claims. This is frustrating to donors and funding organizations that have little upon which to base outcome expectations. The answer is an open information system and process, transparent reporting, and contributions from the scientific community that are based on solid testing and unbiased findings that tie performance to expected outcomes.

In this issue of the *Journal of Mine Action* we have solicited a variety of articles on manual deminers and their personal protective gear. As you will see with many of the articles, this segment of the community seems to use basic information about what it can and cannot do more than the other segments of the landmine community. Numbers are important. Decisions are made from them. It seems, however, that information, though wanted by everyone, is shared by few. Curious? Not when you consider the nature of the mine action.

For example, where is this empirical support to the preposterous claims accompanying mechanical equipment releases and developments? Why don't the mine detecting dog people publish the results of their dog teams efforts in detail? Even those organizations working with victims are reluctant to publicize numbers and data that support their level of effort. Colin King once observed that “one of the greatest obstacles to progress in mine action was peoples in-built reluctance to cooperate” and posited the concept of “information non-cooperation.” There are a variety of reasons behind this such as:



Joe Lokey

### Sensitivity

In spite of the well-intentioned proclamations of most groups and governments, many are sensitive to reporting of casualty rates, number of deminer accidents, causes of accidents, and number of people receiving effective mine awareness education. Sometimes simple nationalism takes over and raw data is frequently manipulated or held in order to either minimize the appearance of incompetence or overstated to influence a more positive message. This reluctance to open organizational or governmental performance data is regrettable and leads to suspicions that can be even more harmful and less productive. Trust needs to be established between those owning the data and those using and basing decisions on that data.

### Competition

NGOs competing for programs and for the funding that goes with them, as well as commercial companies competing for contracts, frequently view the donor pool as a zero-sum entity in which giving to one somehow takes away from another. The fear of “donor fatigue” is, as of yet, unfounded as funded programs seem to be bigger and bigger and donors are still actively seeking solid, outcome-based proposals. Although the Canadian Mine Action Investment database provided for UNMAS is a start, more donor information needs to be made public after tenders are awarded so that the mine action community begins to feel there is plenty of work to go around and funding to support that work.

### Silver Bullet Syndrome

Research facilities protecting their inventions and developments are the absolute worst at sharing incremental achievements in technology fearing the cross-flow will result in others capitalizing on their

work. Hopes for commercial exploitation of new technologies (including patenting) is driving a considerable amount of useful information, technology, and data underground waiting for some opportunity to synthesize it and give it utility. It's like everyone has a small piece of a jigsaw puzzle but no one wants to connect their piece with anyone else so that the picture (“answer”) may be revealed to all. There will never be a single technology that “does it all.” Any metaphorical silver bullet will necessarily be a multi-sensor platform with a complex but reliable data integration and fusion routine. However, this will be impossible to achieve as long as everyone sits on their own little part of the solution.

### The Politics of Ego

Personal and professional competitiveness is a part of any discipline and this is no different. Without a clear distinction among professionals, their worth is built on their backgrounds and experiences though they are frequently embellished because few are the wiser. Few résumés and CV's receive the attention and scrutiny that they should because this inflation of fact permeates the industry in general. On the brighter side, this is a small community and the less capable and charlatans are known to most and don't last long on the more significant projects. See also, “Cowboy Chic.”

### Donor/Corporate Expectations

Expectations of success are generally overstated because of the inability to articulate clear and measurable goals and outcomes. The data required to determine if goals have been met is rarely released therefore comparing planned productivity of operations to the reality of demining or mine action outcomes is difficult at best. Corporations also have an expectation that off-the-shelf technologies unusable

for other purposes can somehow be adapted to current demining needs which explains their inability to produce widely useful tools and equipment.

### Cowboy Chic

Information that could be used to benefit the entire community is frequently held by the ex-patriots and international workers who feel that they have the experience and expertise and don't feel like the hordes of newcomers are worthy of their time. Some have signed on with larger contracts that force them to act like adults while others continue to claim an absolute position of unquestionable authority based on frighteningly little true experience. Some of these are independent consultants who feel their “longevity” around landmines grant them some sort of right to withhold data and information unless a sizeable check accompanies the request.

### Welfare

Less common, but typical of smaller NGOs who have built long-term relationships with donors, are situations in which agencies seeking to sustain long-term government funding (no incentive to complete a program) are reluctant to pass information to anyone other than their benefactor. Some larger donors, and even governments, have their “favorites” or trusted agents to whom a disproportionate share of tenders and contracts are awarded in this quasi-welfare system that keeps less-than-efficient actors on the mine action stage.

### Cost-Benefit Malady

A relatively new disease striking donors of large sums is the paralyzing ability of under-funded and poorly funded organizations to ask for a clear relationship between dollars spent and outcomes produced. Governments are apparently stricken more



than others with the symptoms of the disease being non-responsiveness and incoherent answers to relatively simple questions. The utility of the answers, even if true and forthcoming, are questionable but there does, indeed, seem to be a chronic reluctance on the part of governments to accurately account for funds spent on mine action initiatives.

### Uniformed Ubiquity

One rarely encounters a landmine problem without encountering the military in some shape or form. In some countries, the military are the exclusive owners of all clearance capacity and information. In others, military trainers and advisors pass along skills and knowledge while lending considerable logistic and communications support to clearance efforts. In spite of everything militaries have to offer, there is a strong propensity among all militaries to distrust civilian institutions, especially aid agencies, and, as a consequence, withhold valuable and useful information. This is changing albeit slowly as more integrated efforts occur and trust is built. Similar to the *Silver Bullet Syndrome* above, military research and development results and outcomes are also classified and withheld for years before emerging into the public realm based on fears that new technologies in countermine R&D would be challenged by an adversary. This may be particularly true in the sensor area more than others.

### Signatory Sickness

In one of the more perverse consequences of international cooperation, there seems to be a reluctance among signatories of the Ottawa Convention to not share information with non-signatories of the convention. In a self-defeating act of self-righteous indignation, this refusal to both provide and share useful information to organizations attempting to

assist in mine action efforts is having the unintended consequence of actually slowing progress and making the entire effort more costly thus killing or injuring more people that could have been saved. This form of moralistic political partitioning is not only harmful it's just plain silly.

In short, we see a common thread of "information = power" running through nearly all of these which seems to typify the frustration and outlook of many. Unless and until there are more teaming arrangements, multilateral contract awards, partnerships and other trust-building measures taken that emphasize comparative advantages, this inability to access simple common data for the greater good may actually get worse before it gets better. The United Nations and other large donors, particularly through the Mine Action Support Group (MASG) and other like efforts, can play a great role in opening these doors by encouraging through contracts and bilateral relationships an open systems architecture for all mine action data and information. Host country mine action centers (MACs), who have historically and understandably not programmed manpower for this, can add functions to their staff that enhance their ability to collect and disseminate information of wide use to a variety of people and organizations.

It's just data. It's not evil and it won't bite. As this issue of the *Journal* demonstrates, the PPE community is doing a decent job of getting good data out to you, the consumer, on what you need to know to make more informed choices. The job ahead of all of us is too important to continue with practices that are both petty and irrelevant to efforts to rid land of mines and UXO. There are enough challenges and obstacles facing all of us without simple communication being the first casualty of any operation. Talk to us and tell it like it is. The objective, after all, is to make the process better. Right? ■